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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on the partnership that exists between teachers and students, this resource guide provides a glimpse into the experiences of educators who reflect on their own teaching and learning about writing. The resource guide is part of the "Student Expressions" series, whose aim is to provide a forum for celebrating the writing of students and teachers and provide resource materials which can be coordinated with the Alberta Education Language Arts Program of Studies (Canada) and the elementary, junior high, and senior high school curriculum guides. Essays in the resource guide are (1) "Honouring Yourself" by Lauralyn Houle, which discusses reaching beyond the classroom limitations of textbooks and desks and honoring the lives of the Native students; (2) "The Power of the Pen" by Christine Jellett, which addresses how students can be in control of their writing; and (3) "Reading and Writing in the Senior High School English Classroom" by Jerel Gibbs, which presents strategies which incorporate the learning expectations of Alberta Education in ways that are motivating to students. (RS)

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Teacher's Resource Guide for Student Expressions Anthology

Senior

CS215 273

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Teacher's Resource Guide for
Student Expressions Anthology (Senior)

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TEACHER'S RESOURCE GUIDE

for

Student Expressions Anthology

(Senior)

Northland
SCHOOL DIVISION
No. 61

CS215273

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Introduction

The **Student Expressions** series is composed of student anthologies and teacher's resource guides at the elementary, junior and senior high levels. The purpose of the series is:

- to provide a forum for celebrating the writing of our students and our teachers;
- to provide resource materials which can be coordinated with the Alberta Education Language Arts Program of Studies and the curriculum guides: Language Learning Elementary School, Language Arts Junior High School, and Language Arts Senior High School.

The *student anthologies* provide a glimpse into the young person's world of thoughts, ideas, hopes, dreams and concerns. The student **voice** is central to the anthologies. Hence writing selections are made accessible to educators so that a bridge of understanding can continue to be built between our young people and the adults who teach them.

The *teacher's resource guides* provide a glimpse into the experiences of educators who reflect on their own teaching and learning about writing. Their unique insights offer the reader an opportunity to reflect upon the partnership that exists between our teachers and students.

These materials can be adapted to suit local needs. It is our hope that these resources provide inspiration and support to strengthen rapport among teachers, students, schools and communities.

Together, the student anthologies and teacher's guides are offered as gifts from *many* hearts!

C.K. Amber

Chapter 1

Honouring Yourself

LAURALYN HOULE

Supervisor of Guidance and Counselling

Tansi! Hello! How are you? Let me start by telling you a little about who I am so that you can understand fully what I say on the next few pages.

I was raised in Paddle Prairie, a Metis settlement in northern Alberta. I come from a family of eight children with always a few more children than that around. Growing up in Paddle Prairie was, in a lot of ways, safe and secure. We grew up outside, on horses and in the fields, helping our parents with the never-ending work of farm life, as it is today. We seldom went to town. My life, for the better part of 12 or 13 years, was spent without radio, television, or other access to the outside world. When I had to leave my home community for schooling I saw a world I did not understand. And it did not understand me.

I spent my junior high school and early college years trying to see where I fit into the world. No matter where I went, home was always Paddle. My roots were there then and still are today. There was always a sense of acceptance there of who I was. I didn't have to justify who I was and I didn't have the feeling that followed me around in other places for years: the feeling of not belonging.

Today I am the mother of two beautiful daughters, ages 12 and 14. They have given me the gift of life; they have taught me how to live.

Over the years I have realized that who we are does not depend totally on a place, even though our homes represent our roots. Once we have our roots planted firmly and we have cleaned out the weeds, we are who we choose to be. Who I am is a combination of my roots, my family, my community, and how I have intertwined and connected these things to my life.

This brings me to the purpose of our discussion. I would like to share with you as educators the value, as I see it, of reaching beyond the classroom limitations of textbooks and desks and honouring the lives of those we teach.

The Special Nature of Native Students

By the time Native students reach your classroom they are well on the road to being adults in the Native community. They may be anywhere from 13 to 20 years old. Their chronological age should not be related to *how* these young people are supposed to be. The experiences of young Native people are often beyond what you would expect from their chronological age. When we treat them as younger than they are used to being treated we create barriers.

Young Native people have already had a lot of life experiences that may not seem normal for their ages. An example of this is death. It was found in a recent survey of 30 students aged 12 to 18 in one of our communities that they had already experienced 235 deaths in their lives. The grief these 30 young people have had to deal with is incredible. With grief comes many other issues we are forced to face.

Writing as a Way of Making Connections

In writing, students can connect where they are coming from to what they must learn (not just where the commas and periods fit in). If young people can choose to write about something they know, rather than something they cannot relate to, writing does at least four things:

- It helps students look at themselves.
- It helps students put on paper what they may not be able to express otherwise.
- It helps teachers see their students more clearly.
- It creates an open learning environment which connects people.

These things are valuable for both students and teachers. We need to give today's young people avenues, ways to look within, to sort out, and to share.

Young people of today's world are carrying around a lot of questions with no answers. The writing process can provide them avenues to search out answers in a safe, nonpersonalized, and supportive environment. A student can choose whether or not to make a writing assignment personal. Students expressing themselves through writing, art, drama, and so on can choose to refocus their stories so they are not directed at themselves. This gives them what they need most: a safe place and a way to say what they need to say.

Personal Experiences with Writing

I remember writing to my older brother when he was leaving home. I wanted to write to him about myself and our family. I wrote about a tree and related our family and me to that tree. The roots were what our parents had taught us: home, community. The trunk was me growing up; the branches were different people in my life, my brothers, my sisters, cousins, aunties, friends, etc. The broken branches were the ones we had lost.

After I wrote that I felt great. I still remember the feeling. I felt like I had done what I wanted to do. I showed my brother I cared about him and I knew that, by my writing about that tree, he would get the message.

I believe that by writing and searching young people will come up with the answers they need. I also believe that when we provide them with no avenues for examining the world and their relationships with it they become more hopeless and we will continue to see, as we see today, a high dropout rate and a high suicide rate among them.

I remember my university English teacher telling me to "write what you know." My writing changed. I had a new avenue of personal development, a way to say what I couldn't say in *words*. I wrote everything. I related everything I could to my own life, my own development, my girls' development, my hopes, my dreams, my wishes. I wrote about how I felt about an article in a newspaper or about something I had heard on television. I wrote because, for the first time in all my English courses, someone allowed me to write what I knew best. And I became comfortable with English writing formats. What a gift that lady gave to me!

Asking the Right Questions; Hearing the Answers

We cannot be afraid. If we are afraid to hear the answers, we won't ask the right questions. If I want to teach you something about developing self-esteem, then I cannot be afraid to share or to open myself up to you. With young people it is important to ask the right questions: the *how* questions, the *what* questions. These questions help people share more. *Why* questions usually do not lead anywhere or they cause people to become defensive. One thing I have learned from young people is that they want to be asked questions that matter, that spark meaning. Students are learners and, to learn, they need to be challenged on issues, personal or community or world issues. "To teach is not to tell us what to think but *how* to think."

We know that people are given only what they can handle at each given moment. We are never given anything that we cannot pull ourselves through. I firmly believe that all people have what it takes to handle whatever comes their way. Some of us have got lost along the way and need help in finding the road again.

We know from child development theories that young people need to have many different experiences to know and understand themselves. We encourage young people to read — read anything, newspapers, comics, pocket books — but read! It helps them to expand their minds, their thinking. Writing does the same and we must encourage writing as much as we do reading.

Using Teachable Moments

Parents and educators use *teachable moments* to teach young children how to share and how to care. But somehow we forget that teachable moments never end, no matter what the learner's age. The thing about teachable moments, as students grow older, is that we need to be in tune with who we are and where we are coming from. As Grey Owl said, "Remember before you walk in somebody else's moccasins to take off your own."

We use teachable moments in positive ways as we do with a two year old who does not want to share toys. We sit down and talk about sharing and being kind to others. Teachable moments with young

people come in many shapes and sizes. But they are always right in front of us, ours if we risk openly caring for young people who can sometimes appear not to give a hoot about what we do or say or who we are. (Here, when I use the word *teacher* I do not only mean the teacher in the classroom but all of us who are responsible to young people everywhere and in every situation.)

I believe that we need to step into each young person's world and believe we are responsible for the teaching of that person. Imagine what it would mean if each of us took that responsibility to heart, if we could give each young person we contact what we would give our own child. No young person would be judged for the way they dress, or condemned for having mood swings, or ridiculed for trying. No matter where young people live, who they are, what race they belong to, what language they speak, how they dress, we should use every teachable moment to help them on their way. What we need to remember is that we are helping them toward *their* road, *their* journey, not ours. Each positive and negative statement we make to them will either help or hinder them. It does not matter how small the comment is, it affects them. Even if we use the old cop-out line and say, "I was just kidding," instead of, "I'm sorry," they still know we meant what we said at the time and place we said it.

Teachable moments are precious times given to us so we can help. Teachable moments give us opportunities to verbalize the actions or behaviours of others. To know whether or not we use teachable moments is to ask ourselves, "Do I react to a student's behaviour or comments or do I provide a learning experience for that student and for myself?" We know when we have used teachable moments because we learn something about ourselves and about that student. We know when we do not use them *for* our blood pressure rises and we both walk away frustrated. It is up to each of us. It is something we have to be conscious of at all times. It is a way of life.

One experience I will always remember is when my daughter was in grade three. She came home one day and I could tell something was wrong. I asked her how her day was and she told me this story. A group of young girls at the school refused to have another girl play with them because she was overweight. My daughter watched this and was torn. If she went with the lone girl the others would not let her play with them. If she went with the group of girls, the lone girl would be all

alone. At that moment she chose to go with the group of girls. It was weighing heavily on her mind by the end of the day. All I had to say was, "How do you think the other girl felt?" My girl cried because she said she knew the feeling of not being accepted and she knew the girls were being mean but she chose to go along anyway. My girl learned an important lesson and still carries that lesson with her today.

Modelling

We need to remember that, at all times, we are modelling the behaviour we want from those around us. But we must also remember to allow others to make their own choices. Our decision to give cannot be based on what we receive — not when we are working with young people. That is why we need to be strong in who we are. They know that. I always say that young people can "smell" our attitudes.

If we want to be respected, we must respect. If we want to be heard, we must be willing to listen. If we want to be accepted, we must learn to open ourselves. If we want to be loved, we must show genuine love and care for others. In simple words, we must be ourselves. We must be human. If we're having a bad day we must say so. If we're having a good day, we should say that too.

We must go beyond the limitations of the textbook and also the limitations of the classroom atmosphere. We live in a beautiful northern country. Each of our communities has wonder to it, be it a lake, a river, beautiful trees, or an open prairie. We must give the students the gift of exploring their environments in a physical sense and of relating that experience with pen and paper.

So one day we pack up our paper and pens and we move outdoors. We write about how the wind feels on our faces, or how we and that tree are related, or how it feels to sit in the leaves in the fall — anything that gives us avenues for exploration and provides teachable moments. When we do this we have reached students in a new sense. We have touched the four aspects of their lives that they need to develop: the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Each time we do that the teachings of the moment will be important to the individual. We may not see the outcome. The students may not sense it. But they will feel that something significant has happened.

When we give students the means to write about themselves, from each place within themselves, we are giving them life-long tools. For example, when we ask them to write about how they are connected to Mother Earth we are offering to them the gift of learning, or the gift of reaching inside themselves. For each one has the answers. Too often no one asks the questions.

Working Closely with Students

As teachers, we need to explore, probe, stretch and get our hands dirty doing it. If we get our hands dirty when we are teaching someone how to make a mud pie, it must mean we actually made it with them. We need to write with our students and share our writing with them. We can use the teachable moment after a class and talk about what that moment was like for them.

Bring life with you to class: music, art, dreams. Discuss, share, write. Step into the world of your students. You may have to go to meet them. They may not come to you. We are the ones reaching out and when we have reached and there is no hand extended back we reach some more. We must be patient.

Native people are well known for humour. Use the gifts of your students. These gifts will shine through not only in a positive environment but also in a negative one. For example, the students in the class who always try to make things better have the gift of being nonjudgemental and accepting. Or the students who clown around: they have the gift of humour. Tell them they have these gifts. When we recognize our gifts we can appreciate how they interconnect with those of others and we can see how important they are to have. Too often we never acknowledge others' gifts or see them as gifts. By acknowledging them, by accepting the students for who they are, we contribute immeasurably to their self-esteem. For self-esteem is believing in oneself; feeling good about who we are.

Finally, we need to learn about the community we are in through our students' writings, their art, and their talk. Remember the golden rule about counselling: People already have the answers they need. We just need to provide them the means to explore. What better ways are there for exploration than talking, listening, reading, and writing about those things that are important to us? The bottom line is: the more fun learning is the more we learn.

CHAPTER 2

The Power of the Pen

CHRISTINE JELLETT
Teacher — Paddle Prairie School

It's only a very tiny piece of plastic with a refill, usually in blue or black. But nowadays, as in days of old, it has power far greater than modern weapons. What can it be? Well, the pen, of course! What else has survived the ravages of time and can still convey a message with poignancy and simplicity in a few lines?

THE PEN IS

. . . cheap to keep,
can cut quite deep,
may cause tears to flow
but is a gift to those who know.

Know. Yes, know! We often forget how easy it is to stop knowing. We know the pen is powerful but we forget how that power has to be transferred to useful knowledge and conveyed to our teaching peers and students. We expect them to know what to do with the pen. Sure they know how to hold it. They know how to chew the end off it and, as we all know, they know how to lose it. The life of a pen cannot be easy. More than one gets mutilated, sworn at, and used to perform strange tasks. Turn up the heat!

Pens are a lot like people: Each has the same basic makeup but all are unique. People need to add uniqueness to their pens to have them become powerful. A car without gas is powerless. A blender without electricity is useless. A washing machine without water is ineffective. A pen without someone to make it come alive is a piece of useless plastic.

You and your students become the life of the pen. You make the pen come alive. You give it power. You can make it a four-horsepower pen or you can make it a 10-horsepower pen. The power a pen has depends on the person in whose hand the pen rests.

How can a pen have power? What kind of power? You need only glance around the daily workplace to see what writers can do with pens. They can take messages, write notes, pay bills, and record information. Pens never have system shut-downs and never run out of toner.

The definition of power varies, but, for this discussion, the one I would like to use is that of *being in control.*

There are many things in life that, at any age, we are powerless to control. We cannot change the world because we want to. A hate letter, written in anger, may make us feel better but the situation remains the same. A bad cheque written to solve a problem temporarily comes back to haunt us. What do we do when we realize that we can constructively use that power? The solutions need not be short term and the messages need not be written in haste and futility!

To teenagers the world often seems futile. How often do we forget what it was like to be 16 and sitting in one of those small desks listening to some "old" English teacher "drone on" about Shakespeare and how great he was. We all remember asking, "Why do we need to study this?" Well, has anybody ever answered that question? I try.

The peering eyes, filled with questions or teenage indifference, pierce to your very soul as they stare at you. But someone out there in the sea of sullenness is listening. One student will remember you years from now and may be able to use those skills that he learned while picking his way through old Will's wonders (that's Shakespeare . . . sorry to be sacrilegious).

So why a discussion on how and what you can do with a pen? Your students need to be given the chance to try, to feel the power they can have when they are *in control* of the pen.

The writing students do is often based on comprehension-related activities: read, appraise, apply a concept or a strategy. Time must be given for the transfer of effective writing skills into other content components of a high school education (e.g. social studies). In most small schools, for example, students take English and social studies in different semesters so a transferable skill gets to show its worth. Students need to know that they can use that *stuff* they learn in English to help them succeed in social studies.

An appropriately used quote or phrase, a reference to a well known story outcome or a character comparison, may move students and their pens to the next level in the game of *well educated teen.*

Suggestions for Students

1. You need to write it so people can read it: clear and concise, short and sweet! That's your goal. Crisp and clean. Your thoughts need to be focused: The rambling rose has withered and died. You don't want your rose to be wild and growing on a trellis; you want it to be one perfect sweetheart rose, true in colour, sharp as the thorn it carries, and as perfumed as possible without losing its simplicity. No wonder a rose is often a symbol of love, prickly but perfect.

2. You need to put your heart and soul into the work. We all are aware that when a soul departs a body there is no life. When soul is absent from a written piece there is no depth, no feeling, no personality. There is only a shell. What good would a turtle's shell be if there were no turtle to take refuge in it? You, as controller of the pen, give that shell its innards. You can move mountains by what you say or you can waste ink and paper. As the *pusher of the pen*, this becomes your choice.

3. Your work needs to cause people to think, to question, to doubt, or at least to raise an eyebrow. A tear shed is a reward. A crumpled wad of paper thrown in the garbage can, in a fit of rage, is a statement. You received a reaction. You exerted power. You are in control of your writing.

You are the power of your pen.

Writing Formats

Here are some ways for students to use the power of their pens.

1. **Petitions**
   (Public action strategies to encourage positive action on situations)

2. **Letters of complaint**
   (Persuasive but positive, polite but pointed.)
   - to a Member of Parliament
   - to a counsellor, mayor, or chief
   - to a road crew
   - to a retail establishment if service was poor

3. **Letters of praise**
   - to a family member
   - to your road crew
   - to a local newsletter for coverage received
   - to a coach

4. **Letters of opinion**
   - to newspapers
   - to radio programs
   - to textbook companies
   - to your teacher

5. **Others**
   - plays
   - prose
   - poetry
   - speeches
   - proposals

A Sample Lesson

In my classes I use lessons like the following to demonstrate the relevance of writing to the lives of students.

- **Brainstorm**. In the whole group, have students brainstorm issues significant to them. Have them consider how they would write about these issues to persuade others to their point of view.
- **Select**. Have students select an issue they can do something about through writing. Have them decide on a format appropriate for what they want the writing to accomplish.
- **Mini Lesson**. Review the writing formats selected by the students (e.g. for an opinion letter begin with a statement about the issue, give your opinion, give supporting evidence, summarize your main idea, suggest action to be taken). Review relevant aspects of writing conventions.
- **Write the first draft**. In small groups, draft letters or other documents setting out actions to be taken on the issue.
- **Share and rewrite**. Compose a class letter or document using the best ideas from each small group.
- **Mail the letter**.

In Conclusion

There's no stopping you now. On to the next level! Have your students get out their pens; they, too, can perfect their pens' power. They need to be assured that they can control their pens and nobody can take away their ability to use those tiny pieces of plastic. Have fun!

CHAPTER 3

Reading and Writing in the Senior High School English Classroom

JEREL GIBBS

Vice-Principal/Teacher — Mistassiniy School

As a senior high school English teacher I am always aware of the pressures of the job. English is the only subject in which all students who wish to graduate must write a Diploma Examination, either English 30 or English 33. The curriculum sets high expectations for students and it is our job to help students reach these standards. Competent reading and writing skills are necessary for students to be successful in all content areas. English teachers can ensure this competence.

In the following discussion I present strategies which incorporate the learning expectations of Alberta Education in ways I have found motivating to students. These strategies also help students explore learning and understanding through making personal connections. As well, they can be used in content areas other than English.

What I suggest are not all the things I do in a high school English class, but are strategies I have introduced at the beginning of a term and followed to wherever each group of students has led me. They are not meant to be prescriptive. Part of the fun has been that, while I was never sure where we would arrive, I had managed to teach to the curricular expectations with outcomes that surprised both the students and me.

Two aspects of the English program with which I have been concerned over the years are *sustained reading* and *sustained writing*.

Sustained Reading

I believe that the students I have taught have struggled most with the reading requirements of the English program. Few students seem to have the self-discipline needed to settle down and get at the required reading. I never had time to give and the students never had time to complete their reading assignments as classroom work. Therefore, I assigned reading every night as part of each student's English homework.

I insist that students read 20 to 30 minutes every night. I ask them to locate some place in the house that is distraction-free. I suggest they find an optimum time and an effective reading position so they can concentrate. I tell them that I read lying down for leisure but I have to sit up to concentrate on what I'm reading.

At the beginning of the year I give each student a notebook and have them record their reading explorations in this *literary journal*. I ask them to identify their reading processes. I respond to their comments with suggestions to help them improve.

I use journal writing primarily as a dialogue between the reader and me. I assign a series of novels by genres as well as an assigned novel for the whole class. For example, I might ask the students to select one novel each from any five of the following genres:

- **Science Fiction** (Monica Hughes, Candas Dorsey, Isaac Asimov, Anne McCaffery, Douglas Adams)
- **Horror** (V. C. Andrews, Stephen King, Thomas M. Disch)
- **Contemporary and Historical Romance** (Victoria Hold, Catherine Cookson, Jude Devereaux, Beatrice Small)
- **Children's Literature** (Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, C.S. Lewis, Robert Munsch)
- **Twentieth Century Literature** (George Orwell, John Steinbeck, Aldous Huxley, Margaret Atwood, Beatrice Culleton, Gabriel Garcia Marquez)

- **Nineteenth Century Literature** (Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, the Bronte sisters, Mark Twain, H.G. Wells, Jules Verne)
- **Western** (Zane Grey, Jack Shaefer, Louis L'Amour)
- **Mystery** (Agatha Christie, P.D. James, Dick Francis)
- **Other** (a selection from a genre or author a student particularly enjoys)

I suggest authors and invite students to tell me those they know. I ask them to consider the genre categories into which the works of these authors fit. If books by these authors are not available, I order several copies each of selected classics in paperback which I leave around the classroom for students to peruse when they finish other work. These are readily available through booksellers who send catalogues to the schools. I also allow students to use books they have at home or have purchased, as long as they fit into one of the categories.

I expect students to read at home for 20 to 30 minutes a night. At the beginning of each class students write in their literary journals about what they have read the night before. They indicate how much time they spent reading and the number of the page they have reached. This helps them track their reading in terms of speed and quantity.

Students summarize as concisely as possible what they have read. They can complain about the reading selection and can comment, among other things, on their frustrations with the pace of the action, the level of detail, and the language used in the piece. (One student who had read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* complained bitterly in his journal about the three-page description of the turtle crossing the road. He felt that only someone "stoned" would write something like that. I replied, describing how the turtle both symbolized and foreshadowed the events still to come in the novel. I used this response with the whole class several days later.) They flag difficult words or passages they cannot figure out from the context clues of the passage. They comment, whenever they find something they can connect with: a point of view, a similarity of experience, even a nifty piece of language usage. They describe what it was that helped them make the connection. (Another student reading *The Grapes of Wrath* connected the farmers

being forced off the land with the events which led to the Native land claims of today.)

These responses give me insight into the understandings students have of their novels as they read them. I find it exciting to watch students begin to write their ways into understanding a novel. This develops as students feel more confident writing about what they read. It also puts some pressure on them to do the reading as expected. Those who have not done their reading assignments the night before have to explain why they haven't, what they did instead, and how much reading they plan to do the next time to catch up.

If students do not wish to continue reading a novel I ask that they read at least the first 50 pages and explain in the literary journal why they do not wish to continue. They can then move along to another author or genre. Students can refuse to continue reading a book once during the year. If the first 50 pages have been read and responded to in journals and if they have explained why they don't wish to continue, I consider this one of the six books to be read. However, I insist that they finish the assigned novel.

Literary journals work best with a small number of students. With a large class I comment in detail on a third of the journals each day on a rotating basis. These written conversations are more intimate and interesting than reading the standard book report.

Sustained Writing

Studies have shown that the average high school student often writes as little as 200 words a week. Traditionally, students are taught through lectures and note-taking. Yet in English classes the writing expectations include explorations in literary genres as well as both personal and critical literary response. To help students become confident enough to attempt these responses, I encourage them to make personal connections and critical responses to the selections being taught.

I believe that writing should be a part of every class, particularly at the beginning of the year. Having the students begin each class by writing in their literary journals is not only a useful class management strategy, it also sets the tone for other writing expectations I have for the class.

The written expression portions of both senior high school English Diploma examinations have one aspect in common: Students are asked to make personal connections with a piece of literature provided in the examination booklet. From the beginning of the year, I challenge students to read literature and, through a variety of writing activities, help them to make reasonable interpretations of it. Here are some writing activities I use with short stories, poems, essays, plays, and novels that I assign to students throughout the year.

Character diaries. These work well for such complex literary works as Shakespearian plays. I have the students choose a major character and describe events through his or her eyes. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* became a lot clearer to the students when they kept running diaries recording the events leading up to the final scene in the crypt. Character diaries also work well for short stories. We had a wonderful time reading the diary entries written by Wanda in "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories" in *Sunlight and Shadows*. This technique can also be used to explore the roles of lesser characters in plays and novels. Quick and to the point, it allows the reader to assess the importance of characters to the plot.

Making personal connections. Generally, people place themselves in the stories they read. They are drawn to situations they can relate to, either through the exploration of a theme or the relating of an experience to one of their own. I like to model how personal connections can lead to writing by sharing a piece of writing with the students based on a book that I am currently reading or have recently read.

Here is a piece of writing I shared with a grade ten class approximately half way through the year. By then the students had become used to my anecdotes on the assignments given in class. They had recorded a number of personal connections in their literary journals. We were working on an essay format using observation and detail to state a point of view. We had been reading some of Annie Dillard's essays on her observations about nature in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Dillard discusses ways of seeing. She describes a moment when, at a glance, she saw something purely through her senses. For her it was the sunset over the mountain

back-lighting a cedar, opening a celestial door when she least expected it. That resonated. It reminded me of times when I had been caught by surprise by what I had glimpsed. I wove these experiences into an essay. To my surprise, the essay became an affirmation of a spiritual faith I had not associated with myself before. I mention this because it was the first experience I had where the writing took hold and led me to its conclusions rather than to mine, and I wanted the students to know this could and should happen.

Unexpected Visions

One evening as my wife and I sat in the living room reading, pelicans flew into my field of vision in the window behind my wife. The sky, nearing sunset, was a fiery blaze: red, orange, and gold. Seven or more pelicans were weaving in and out, maintaining an exact distance between wing tips, performing an aerial ballet to a celestial music only they heard. Large, slow and graceful, the birds flew in continually changing patterns across the sky. This was an unexpected gift, a vision of perfect motion. I watched the pelicans until they disappeared. I felt unexpectedly reassured and, surprised, realized that I had felt this way before.

Barely a half block from my home is a huge marsh stretching east, west, and south into the distance. It consists of the twisting river which joins two lakes, long grasses, bushes, a few trees, and any number of sloughs. In the spring and fall these sloughs are home to innumerable ducks. They are so vigorously hunted in the evenings that sometimes I imagine myself to be in a war zone.

Flat and inexpressive, the marsh seems an odd place to expect the unexpected. I drive along the north edge of the marsh as I go to and from work each day. The marsh is routine, its colours and shapes familiar. My eyes roam looking for distractions.

I once saw a fox flee from the houses on the other side of the road. Red, intense, and utterly wild, it sped across the road in front of my car and disappeared into the marsh. In its mouth was a splash of fur that looked like my orange tabby cat. But when I pulled into my yard the cat was on the doorstep, tame, waiting to get into the house to be fed.

Each spring someone sets fire to the grass in the marsh. Brown and flattened from the snow, these fires clear the marsh land for new growth, food for the horses and cattle who roam there. I have never seen anyone actually light these fires but by nightfall flames light the sky, threatening yet remote. In the morning the fires are far away. The marsh is transformed into a blackened rug fringed and patterned with the brown grass missed by the meandering flames.

Fish flies erupt in May so thick they spiral like wisps of smoke upward into the sky. I imagine them waiting to land one at a time at tiny fish fly airports, harassed staff in the control towers, the fish flies stacked upwards by the millions, waiting their turn. Why else would they hover so? Within a week the fish flies have died off. Their bodies rim the lake shores in a frame six inches thick.

In summer the bugs are so voracious I can only explore the marsh in the heat of the day. The bugs have found what little shade there is and stay put. The sky is a gigantic tent top of blue bleaching white in the brilliant sun. I reached the edge of the marsh one hot summer afternoon. Cloudless, the sky was all light and so was the marsh. Dazzled by the intensity of the sun, I shaded my eyes with my hand. I searched for shapes to focus my eyes on. I could find none. All I could see was light. Where were the bushes, the trees, the ring of forest which surrounds the marsh? They were obscured by light. They were consumed by light. They were light. I turned away quickly, resting my eyes on the grey shimmer of the road behind me. The houses and trees

on the other side of the road became reference points, defined, given depth by the shade. I needed order and light recognizable. When I looked back into the marsh, oriented and reassured, I could see the bushes, grass, a group of horses grazing lazily in the distance.

One Sunday afternoon during the winter I was driving to the store for milk. As I glanced at the snow-covered marsh, the sun brought a group of barren poplar trees to life. I turned off the road, parked at the local restaurant, grabbed the camera I kept in the glove compartment, and ran back to take a picture. I couldn't find the angle. I couldn't find what I had seen. I took a picture anyway, hoping the camera could find what I had lost. The camera was cheap, the picture over-exposed.

I remember thinking that the light was alive, flowing through the trees toward me, back lighting each branch, each twig, in red and gold. The light was alive, the trees were alive and so was I. This thought is all I have left. I could no more capture this vision in memory than I could take a picture of a dream.

So . . .

The pelicans flew westward, receding into the setting sun. Flying in perfect symmetry, they did not seem to notice the genius of their flight. True to instinct they flew as nature taught them, unamazed. Their ballet, a nonchalant perfection, struck me to stillness. And as I reflected I realized that I had been given glimpses of who is really in charge here.

Later on that evening I told my wife that I had seen some pelicans flying into the sunset. Night had drained the light from the window behind her. I saw her smile quietly. I imagined her watching pelicans in her mind's eye, reminded of unexpected visions, hinting at the Creator's presence, affirming her faith.

I wrote this essay during class time while the students wrote. Several students watched me struggle with words, read over what I had written, and encouraged me to continue. The essay was a departure for me, an experiment that connected a series of observations to a central theme. I expected the students to get really restless when I read it to them so I photocopied the draft, with all the changes: parts crossed out, writing up the sides of the pages, and arrows going everywhere. I got them to respond by asking them for help in revising the essay. The students proved themselves very helpful and considerate. They also turned in a series of sharply focused pieces of writing on what they had seen through close observation of nature around the community.

Kirby, D. et al., in *Inside Out*, describe "Imitation in Kind."

> I look for pieces of literature that lend themselves to student imitation. Quite simply, the assignment is to do the kind of thing the author did, but in each student's own way. It should be a try-it-and-see kind of exercise. (p. 147)

Writing from settings. In his book, *Prairy Erth*, William Least Heat Moon drives and walks through a Kansas county at the beginning of the Great Western Prairie. As he arrives at a point of interest, stories emerge relating to the history and/or the people's experiences. Using the try-it-and-see approach, I took a central point in the community, Wabasca-Desmarais, and described travelling through the community relating points of interest as I went along. Here's a brief example:

> We're at the bridge. It represents the centre of the community. If you look straight ahead, there is the new (gravel) highway to Athabasca. On this road you go past the Bigstone Motel and further up is the turn-off to the Esso natural gas plant, the Amoco plant, and the C.S. Resources heavy oil plant. These oil and gas projects employ, maybe, two dozen people from the community between them.
>
> Opposite the bridge on the right hand side of the road is the Northern Food Store. And as we turn right to drive through Desmarais, the road follows the river up to the Shell gas station.

> Then the river veers to the right and we drive past a field which once housed the sewer system for the school and the teacherages. To the left is Mistassiniy School and on either side of it are the teacherages, trailers for the single staff, houses for the married staff, although the present arrangement isn't quite like that. On our immediate right is the new community arena. It is in use all the time even though the inside is not quite finished. This arena is a testament to bingo players, the Uniplex Association, provincial government agencies, and the Bigstone Band who worked cooperatively to get this project off the ground. Hundreds of volunteer hours were donated by community members to get the arena ready for use. It represents a new spirit in the community where everyone worked together for a common cause.

This writing strategy helped me sustain a focus while allowing me to relate stories and events as I came to them. I have asked students to explore and relate stories of their particular neighbourhood, focusing on what is unique, what is special, and what is worthwhile about the area surrounding their homes.

One day we got a video camera and some film and headed out after school to explore visually what the students had written about in class. They described on camera what made the particular spot interesting or important to them. I made one stipulation. The writing had to be ready before we did the videotaping.

In doing this, I discovered many things about Wabasca-Desmarais I had not known before, including a man who made saddles and bridles for horses as a hobby, the best fishing holes, and where the lake suddenly drops off at one swimming area. The students called them *pot holes* in the lake. (I made two boys get into the water and walk into these holes and filmed them suddenly disappearing up to their necks in water.) We saw an osprey in flight along the way to the famous cliffs (at least fifteen feet high) which provide a great view of the North Wabasca Lake, and several springs which bled rust-filled water and apparently never froze. We found out about family histories and how the families came to live there. What surprised us all was how much there was to know about the community once we started exploring.

Oral presentations of a personal response. I've used this primarily with short stories. Each student selects a short story from one of the prescribed texts. So do I. Students write a response essay to an event or theme in the short story, connecting it to a personal experience. They present this orally to the rest of the class. The piece of writing has to include a brief synopsis of the incident or theme they are responding to. It has to describe in some detail the connections they have made and their reasons for making these connections. When students read the responses orally they are more at ease if they have formed a circle with the desks. I do not insist they stand up to read. Prior to the students giving their responses I model mine to the piece of literature I have chosen.

Visualizing literature: Advertise That Book. I ask students to create a poster which encourages others to read a book they enjoyed during the year. It must visually illustrate one aspect of the book. One girl advertised Hal Borland's *When the Legends Die* by drawing the boy, the bear, and the rodeo rider within a circle. I place those posters around the school and in the library.

Visualizing literature: Poem Posters. To get students to select poems for poetry posters I collect all the poetry anthologies I can find and place them on tables in the centre of the classroom. I ask students to skim through these anthologies and find 10 poems they can relate to or enjoy in some way. They record the name of the poem, the author, the anthology, and the page number(s) in their notes. I ask them to select a poem for their poem poster.

This poster provides a visual exploration of one striking aspect of the poem.

Dos and Don'ts for Teaching Writing

*Kirby, D. et al. (*Inside Out*, p. 144.) suggest that if you want students to write interestingly and well about literature:

Don't

- give them writing assignments to accompany each selection
- give them lock-step writing assignments
- judge their writing by the standard of what the professional critic might say about the selection
- make everyone in the class do the same assignment

Do

- allow the students the right not to write sometimes
- let the assignments grow out of the talk you have been having; let it be an extension of the classroom conversation, a setting in order of the students' thoughts and impressions
- let the students modify assignments in the light of their understanding
- make it clear what you expect from student writing
- read and respond to the students' writings as you do to the writing of established authors — somewhat humbly, somewhat tentatively
- make writing a process of pleasure, not punishment

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*Kirby D., & Liner, T. with Ruth Vinz. (1988). *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Boynton Cook (Heinemann).

In Conclusion

These are by no means the only strategies you can use to motivate students to read and write about literature. Nor are these the only expectations in my classroom. Still, when students read and respond in their own voices, I am often surprised by the insights and connections they make. I look forward to reading their journals and literary responses and am drawn into responding. In this way I support the students in their frustrations, discoveries, defeats, and victories as they work with and enjoy literature.

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